Sisters

By

KATHLEEN NORRIS

(Continued)

She thought him an extremely difficult man to live with, and was angered when her hints to this effect led him to remark that she was the "limit." They had a serious quarrel one day, when he told her that she was the most selfish and spoiled woman he had ever known. He called her attention to the other women of the town, busy, contented women, sending children off to school, settling babies down for naps in sunny dooryards, cooking and laughing and hurrying to and fro.

"Yes, and look at them!" Cherry said with ready tears. "Shabby, thin, tired all the time!"

"The trouble with you is," Martin said, departing, "you've been told that you're pretty and sweet all your life—and you're spoiled! You are pretty, yes—" he added, more mildly. "But, by George, you sulk so much, and you crab so much, that I'm darned if I see it any more! All I see is trouble!"

With this he left her. Left her to a burst of angry tears, at first, when she dropped her lovely little head on the blue gingham of her apron sleeve and cried bitterly.

The kettle began to sing on the stove, a bee came in and wandered about the hot kitchen; the grocer knocked, and Cherry let the big lout of a boy stare at her red eyes uncaring.

Then she went swiftly into the bedroom and began to pack and change. She'd show Martin Lloyd—she'd show Martin Lloyd! She was going straight to Dad—she'd take the—take the—

She frowned. She had missed the nine o'clock train; she must wait for the train at half-past two. Wait where? Well, she could only wait here. Very well, she would wait here. She would not get Martin any lunch, and when he raged she would explain.

She finished her packing and put the house in order. Then, in unaccustomed mid-morning leisure, she sank into a deep rocker and began to read. Quiet and shade and order reigned in the little house.

Steps came bounding up to Cherry's door; her heart began to beat; a knock sounded. She got to her feet, puzzled; Martin did not knock.

It was Joe Robinson, his closest friend at the mine.

"Say, listen, Mrs. Lloyd; Mart can't get home to dinner," said Joe. "He don't feel extra well—he was in the

"He Was in the Engine Room and He Kinder—Fainted."

engine room and he kinder—he kinder—"

"Fainted?" Cherry asked sharply, turning a little pale.

"Well,. kinder. Lawson made him lay down," Joe said. "And he's coming home when the wagon comes down, at three o'clock. He says to tell you he's fine!"

"Oh, thank you, Joe!" Cherry said. She shut the door, feeling weak and frightened. She flew to unpack her bag, hung up her hat and coat, darkened the bedroom and turned down the bed; waited anxiously for Mart's return.

She was deeply concerned over the news from Martin. Cherry met his limp form at the front door, and whisked him into a cool bed and put chopped ice on the aching forehead and got him, grateful and penitent, off to sleep.

For a day or two Martin stayed in bed and Cherry spoiled and petted him, and was praised and thanked for every step she took. After that they took a little trip into the mountains near by, and Cherry sent Alix postcards that made her sister feel almost a pang of envy.

But then the routine began again, and the fearful heat of midsummer came, too. Red Creek baked in a smother of dusty heat, the trees in the dry orchards, beside the dry road, dropped circles of hot shadow on the clodded, rough earth. Farms dozed under shimmering lines of dazzling air and in the village, from ten o'clock until the afternoon began to wane, there was no stir. Flies buzzed and settled on screen doors, the creek shrunk away betwen crumbling rocky banks, the butcher closed his shop and milk soured in the bottles.

The Turners and some other families always camped together in the mountains during this season, and they were off when school closed, in an enviable state of ecstasy and anticipation. Cherry had planned to join them, but an experimental week-end was enough. The camp was in the cool woods, truly, but it was disorderly, swarming with children, the tents were small and hot, the whole settlement laughed and rioted and surged to and fro in a manenr utterly foreign to her. She returned, to tell Martin that it was "horribly common" and weather the rest of the summer in Red Creek.

Martin sympathized. He had never cared particularly for the Turners; was perfectly willing to keep the friendship within bounds.

He sympathized as little with another friendship she made, some months later, with the wife of a young engineer who had recently come to the mine. Pauline Runyon was a few years older than her husband, a handsome, thin, intense woman, who did everything in an entirely individual way. She took one of the new little bungalows that were being erected in Red Creek "Park," and furnished it richly and inappropriately, and established a tea table and a samovar beside the open fireplace. Cherry began to like better than anything else in the world the hours spent with Pauline.

Pauline read Browning, Francis Thompson and Pater, and introduced Cherry to new worlds of thought. She talked to Cherry of New York, which she loved, and of the men and women she had met there. She sometimes sighed and pushed the bright hair back from Cherry's young and innocent and discontented little face, and said tenderly: "On the stage, my dear—anywhere, anywhere, you would be a furore!"

And thinking, in the quiet evenings—for Martin's work kept him later and later at the mine—Cherry came to see that her marriage had been a great mistake. She had not been ready for marriage. She would sit on the back steps, as the evenings grew cooler, and watch the exquisite twilight fade, and the sorrow and beauty of life would wring her heart.

A dream of ease and adoration and beauty came to her. She did not visualize any special place, any special gown or hour or person. But she saw her beauty fittingly environed; she saw cool rooms, darkened against this blazing midsummer glare; heard ice clinking against glass; the footsteps of attentive maids; the sound of cultivated voices, of music and laughter. She had had these dreams before, but they were becoming habitual now. She was so tired—so sick—so bored with her real life; it was becoming increasingly harder and harder for her to live with Martin. She was always in a suppressed state of wanting to break out, to shout at him brazenly: "I don't care if your coffee is weak! I like it weak! I don't care if you don't like my hat—I do! Stop talking about yourself!"

Various little mannerisms of his began seriously to annoy her; a rather grave symptom, had Cherry but known it. He danced his big fingers on the handle of the sugar spoon at breakfast, sifting the sugar over his cereal; she had to turn her eyes resolutely away from the sight. He blew his nose, folded his handkerchief, and then brushed his nose with it firmly left and right; she hated the little performance that was never altered. He had a certain mental slowness; would blink at her politely and patiently when she flashed plans or hopes at him: "I don't follow you, my dear!" This made her frantic.

She was twenty, undisciplined and exacting. She had no reserves within herself to which she could turn. Bad things were hopelessly bad with Cherry; her despairs were the dark and tearful despairs of girlhood, prematurely transferred to graver matters.

Martin was quite right in some of his contentions; girl-like, she was spasmodic and unsystematic in her housekeeping; she had times of being discontented and selfish. She hated economy and the need for careful managing.

In October Alix chanced to write her a long and unusually gossipy letter. Alix had a new gown of black grenadine, and she had sung at an afternoon tea, and had evidently succeeded in her first venture. Also they had had a mountain climb and enclosed were snapshots Peter had taken on the trip.

Cherry picked up the little kodak prints; there were four or five of them. She studied them with a pang at her heart. Alix in a loose rough coat, with her hair blowing in the wind and the peaked crest of Tamalpais behind her—Alix busy with lunch boxes—Alix standing on the old bridge by the mill. A wave of homesickness swept over the younger sister; life tasted bitter. She hated Alix, hated Peter; above all she hated herself. She wanted to be there, in Mill Valley, free to play and to dream again—

A day or two later she told Martin kindly and steadily that she thought it had all "been a mistake." She told him that she thought the only dignified thing to do was to part. She liked him; she would always wish him well, but since the love had gone out of their relationship, surely it was only honest to end it.

"What's the matter?" Martin demanded.

"Nothing special," Cherry assured him, her eyes suddenly watering. "Only I'm tired of it all. I'm tired of pretending. I can't argue about it. But I know it's the wise thing to do."

"You'd go back to your father, I suppose?" Martin said, yawning.

"Until I could get into something," Cherry replied with diginity. A vague thought of the stage flitted through her mind.

"Oh!" Martin said politely. "And I suppose you think your father would agree to this delightful arrangement?" he asked.

"I know he would!" Cherry answered eagerly.

"All right—you write and ask him!" Martin agreed good-naturedly. Cherry was surprised at his attitude, but grateful more than surprised.

"Not cross, Mart?" she asked.

"Not the least in the world!" he answered lightly.

"Because I truly believe that we'd both be happier—" the woman said hesitatingly. Martin did not answer.

The next day she sat down to write her father. She meditated, with a troubled brow. Her letter was unexpectedly hard to compose. She could not take a bright and simple tone, asking her father to rejoice in her homecoming. Somehow the matter persisted in growing heavy and the words twisted themselves about into ugly and selfish sounds. Cherry was young, but even to her youth the phrases, the "misunderstood" and the "uncongenial," the "friendly parting before any bitterness creeps in," and the "free to decide our lives in some happier and wiser way," rang false. Pauline had been divorced a few years ago, and the only thing Cherry disliked in her friend was her cold and resentful references to her first huband.

No, she couldn't be a divorced woman. It was all spoiled, the innocent past and the future; there was no way out! She gave up the attempt at a letter and began to annoy Martin with talk of a visit home again.

"What you want to go for?"

"Oh, just—just—" Cherry's irrepressible tears angered herself almost as much as they did Martin. "I think they'd like me to!" she faltered.

"Go if you want to!" he said, but she knew she could not go on that word.

"That's it," she said at last to herself, in one of her solitary hours. "I'm married and this is marriage. For the rest of my life it'll be Mart and I—Mart and I—in everything! For richer, for poorer; for better, for worse—that's marriage. He doesn't beat me and we have enough money, and perhaps there are a lot of other women worse off than I am. But it's—it's funny."

CHAPTER IX.

In January, however, he came home one noon to find her hatted and wrapped to go.

"Oh, Mart—it's Daddy!" she said. "He's ill—I've got to see him! He's awfully ill."

"Telegram?" asked Martin, not particularly pleased, but not unsympathetic, either.

For answer she gave him the yellow paper that was wet with her tears.

For Answer She Gave Him the Yellow Paper That Was Wet With Tears.

"Dad ill," he read. "Don't worry. Come if you can. Alix."

"I'll bet it's a put-up job between you and Alix—" Martin said in indulgent suspicion.

Her indignant glance sobered him; he hastily arranged money matters and that night she got off the train in the dark wetness of the valley, and was met by a rush of cool and fragrant air. Cherry got a driver, rattled and jerked up to the house in a surrey, and jumped out, her heart almost suffocating her.

Alix came flying to the door; the old lamplight and the odor of wood smoke poured through. There was no need for words; they burst into tears and clung together.

An hour later Cherry, feeling as if she was not the same woman who waked in Red Creek this same morning and got Martin's eggs and coffee ready, crept into her father's room. Alix had warned her to be quiet, but at the sight of the majestic old gray head and the fine old hands clasped together on the sheet, her self-control forsook her entirely and she fell to her knees and began to cry again.

The nurse looked at her disapprovingly, but after all, it made little difference. Dr. Strickland roused only once again and that was many hours later. Cherry and Alix were still keeping their vigil; Cherry, worn out, had been dozing; the nurse was resting on a couch in the next room.

Suddenly both daughters were wide awake at the sound of the hoarse yet familiar voice. Alix fell on her knees and caught the cold and wandering hand.

"What is it, darling?" The old, half-joking maternal manner was all in earnest now.

"Peter?" he said thickly.

"Peter's in China, dear. You remember that Peter was to go around the world? You remember that, Dad?"

"No—" he said musingly. They thought he slept again, but he presently added: "Somewhere in Matthew—no, in Mark—Mark is the human one—Mark was as human as his Master—"

"Shall I read you from Mark?" Alix asked, as his voice sank again. A shabby old Bible always stood at her father's bedside; she reached for it, and making a desperate effort to steady her voice, began to read. The place was marked by an old letter, and opened at the chapter he seemed to desire, for as she read he seemed to be drinking in the words. Once they heard him whisper, "Wonderful!" Cherry got up on the bed and took the splendid dying head in her arms; the murky winter dawn crept in and the lamp burned sickly in the daylight. Hong could be heard stirring. Alix closed the book and extinguished the lamp. Cherry did not move.

"Charity!" the old man said presently, in a simple, childish tone. Later, with bursts of tears, in all the utter desolation of the days that followed, Cherry loved to remember that his last utterance was her name. But Alix knew, though she never said it, that it was to another Charity he spoke.

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Subdued, looking younger and thinner in their new black, the sisters came downstairs, ten days later, for a business talk. Peter had been named as one executor; but Peter was far away, and it was a pleasant family friend, a kindly old surgeon of Dr. Strickland's own age, or near it, and the lawyer, George Sewall, the other executor, who told them about their affairs. Anne, as co-heiress, was present at this talk, with Justin sitting close beside her. Martin, too, who had come down for the funeral, was there.

The house went to the daughters; there were books and portraits for Anne, a box or two in storage for Anne, and Anne was mentioned in the only will as equally inheriting with Alexandra and Charity. For some legal reason that the lawyer and Dr. Younger made clear, Anne could not fully inherit, but her share would be only a trifle less than her cousins'.

Things had reached this point when Justin Little calmly and confidently claimed that Anne's share was to be based upon an old loan of Anne's father to his brother, a loan of three thousand dollars to float Lee Strickland's invention, with the understanding that Vincent Strickland be subsequently entitled to one-third of the returns. As the patent had been sold for nearly one hundred and fifty thousand dollars, one-third of it, with accumulative interest for ten years, of which no payment had ever been made Anne, was a large proportion of the entire estate, and the development of this claim, in Justin Little's assured, woodeny voice, caused every one to look grave.

The estate was not worth one hundred and fifty thousand dollars now, by any means; it had been reduced to little more than two-thirds of that sum, and Anne's bright concern that every one should be satisfied with what was right, and her ingenuous pleasure in Justin's cleverness in thinking of this possibility, were met with noticeable coldness.

If Anne was wrong, and the paper she held in her hand worthless, each girl would inherit a comfortable little fortune, but if Anne was right, Cherry and Alix would have only a few thousand dollars apiece, and the old home.

The business talk was over before any of them realized the enormity of Anne's contention, and Anne and Justin had departed. But both the old doctor and the lawyer agreed with Martin that it looked as if Anne was right, and when the family was alone again, and had had the time to digest the matter, they felt as if a thunderbolt had fallen across their lives.

"That Anne could do it!" Alix said, over and over. Cherry seemed dazed, spoke not at all, and Martin had said little.

"People will do anything for money!" he observed once drily. He had met Justin sternly. "I'm not thinking of my wife's share—I didn't marry her for her money; never knew she had any! But I'm thinking of Alix."

"Yes—we must think of darling Alix!" Anne had said, nervously eager that there should be no quarrel. "If Uncle Lee intended me to have all this money, then I suppose I must take it, but I shan't be happy unless things are arranged so that Alix shall be comfortable!"

"B-but the worst of it is, Alix!" Cherry stammered, suddenly, on the day before she and Martin were to return to Red Creek. "I—I counted on having enough—enough to live my own life! Alix, I can't—I can't go back!"

"Why, my darling—" Alix exclaimed, as Cherry began to cry in her arms. "My darling, it is as bad as all that?"

"Oh, Alix," whispered the little sister, trembling, "I can't bear it. You don't know how I feel. You and Dad were always here; now that's all gone—you're going to rent the house and try to teach singing—and I've nothing to look forward to—I've nobody!"

"Listen, dear," Alix soothed her. "If they advise it, and especially if Peter advises it when he gets back, we'll fight Anne. And then if we win our fight, I'll always keep the valley house open. And if we don't, why I'm going to visit you and Martin every year, and perhaps I'll have a little apartment some day—I don't intend to board always—"

But she was crying, too. Everything seemed changed, cold and strange; she had suspected that Cherry's was not a successful marriage; she knew it now, and to resign the adored little sister to the unsympathetic atmosphere of Red Creek, and to miss all the old life and the old associations, made her heart ache.

"There's—there's nothing, special, Cherry?" she asked after a while.

"With Martin? Oh, no," Cherry answered, her eyes dried, and her packing going on composedly, although her voice trembled now and then. "No, it's just that I get bad moods," she said, bravely. "I was pretty young to marry at all, I guess."

"Martin loves you," Alix suggested timidly.

"He takes me for granted," Cherry said, after a pause. "There doesn't seem to be anything alive in the feeling between us," she added, slowly. "If he says something to me, I make an effort to get his point of view before I answer. If I tell him some plan of mine, I can see that he thinks it sounds crazy! I don't seem very domestic—that's all. I—I try. Really, I do! But—" and Cherry seemed to brace herself in soul and body—"but that's marriage. I'll try again!"

She gave Alix a long kiss in parting, the next day, and clung to her.

"I'll write you about the case, and wire you if you're needed, and see you soon!" Alix said, cheerfully. Then she turned and went back into the empty house, keeping back her tears until the sound of the surrey had quite died away.

CHAPTER X.

Alexandra Strickland, coming down the stairway of the valley house on an April evening, glanced curiously at the door. Only eight o'clock, but the day had been so long and so quiet that she had fancied that the hour was much later, and had wondered who knocked so late.

She crossed to the door and opened it to darkness and rain, and to a man in a raincoat who whipped off a spattered cap and stood smiling in the light of the lamp she held. Instantly, with a sort of gasp of surprise and pleasure and some deeper emotion, she set down the lamp, and held out her hands gropingly and went into his arms. He laughed joyously as he kissed her, and for a minute they clung together.

"Peter!" she said. "You angel—when did you arrive and what are you doing, and tell me all about it!"

"But Alix—you're thin!" Peter said, holding her at arm's length. "And—and—" He gently touched the black she wore, and fixed puzzled and troubled eyes upon her face. "Alix—" he asked, apprehensively.

For answer she tried to smile at him, but her lips trembled and her eyes brimmed. She had led the way into the old sitting room.

"You heard—about Dad?" Alix faltered, turning to face him at the mantel.

"Your father!" Peter said, shocked. "But hadn't you heard, Peter?"

"My dear—my dearest child. I'm just off the steamer. I got in at six o'clock. I'd been thinking of you all the time, and I suddenly decided to cross the bay and come straight on to the valley, before I even went to the club or got my mail! Tell me—your father—"

She had knelt before the cold hearth, and he knelt beside her, and they busied themselves with logs and kindling in the old way. A blaze crept up about the logs and Alix accepted Peter's handkerchief and wiped a streak of soot from her wrist, quite as if she was a child again, as she settled herself in her chair.

Peter took the doctor's chair, keeping his concerned and sympathetic eyes upon her.

"He was well one day," she said, simply, "and the next—the next, he didn't come downstairs, and Hong waited and waited—and about nine o'clock I went up—and he had fallen—he had fallen—"

She was in tears again and Peter put his hand out and covered hers and held it.

"He must have been going to call some one," said Alix, after a while, "they said he never suffered at all. This was January, the last day, and Cherry got here the same night. He knew us both toward morning. And that—that was all. Cherry was here for two weeks. Martin came and went—"

"Where is Cherry now?" Peter interrupted.

"Back at Red Creek." Alix wiped her eyes. "She hates it, but Martin had a good position, there. Poor Cherry, it made her ill."

"Anne came?"

"Anne and Justin, of course." Peter could not understand Alix's expression. She fell silent, still holding his hand and looking at the fire.

He looked at her with a great rush of admiration and affection. She was not only a pretty and a clever woman; but, in her plain black, with this new aspect of gravity and dignity, and with new notes of pathos and appeal in her exquisite voice, he realized that she was an extremely charming woman.

Before he said good-by to her, he had asked her to marry him. He well remembered her look of bright and interested surprise.

"D'you mean to tell me you have forgotten your lady love of the hoop-skirts and ringlets?" she had demanded.

"No." Peter had told her, frankly. "I shall always love her, in a way. But she is married; she never thinks of me. And I like you so much, Alix; I like our music and cooking and tramps and reading—together. Isn't that a pretty good basis for marriage?"

"No!" Alix had answered, decidedly. "Perhaps if I were madly in love with you I should say yes, and trust to little fingers to lead you gently, and so on—"

He remembered ending the conversation in one of his quick moods of irritation against her. If she couldn't take anybody or anything seriously—he had said.

Poor Alix—she was taking life seriously enough tonight, Peter thought, as he watched her.

"Tell me about Cherry," he said.

"Cherry is well, but just a little thin, and heartbroken now, of course. Martin never seems to stay at any one place very long, so I keep hoping—"

"Doesn't make good!" Peter said, shaking his head.

"Doesn't seem to! It's partly Cherry, I think," Alix said honestly. "She was too young, really. She never quite settles down, or takes life in earnest. But he's got a contract now for three years, and so she seems to be resigning herself, and she has a maid, I believe."

"She must love him," Peter submitted. Alix looked surprised.

"Why not?" she smiled. "I suppose when you've had ups and downs with a man, and been rich and poor, and sick and well, and have lived in half-a-dozen different places, you rather take him for granted!" she added.

"Oh, you think it works that way?" Peter asked, with a keen look.

"Well, don't you think so? Aren't lots of marriages like that?"

"You false alarm. You quitter!" he answered. Alix laughed, a trifle guiltily. Also she flushed, with a great wave of splendid young color that made her face look seventeen again. "Your father left you—something, Alix?" Peter asked presently, with some hesitation.

"That," she answered frankly, "is where Anne comes in!"

"Anne?"

"Anne and Justin came straight over," Alix went on, "and they were really lovely. Doctor Younger and George Sewall were here every day; you and George were named as executors. I was so mixed up in policies and deeds and overdue taxes and interest and bonds—"

"Poor old Alix, if I had only been here to help you!" the man said. And for a moment they looked a little consciously at each other.

"Well, anyway," the girl resumed hastily, "when it came to reading the will, Anne and Justin sprung a mine under us! It seems that ten years ago, when the Strickland patent fire extinguisher was put upon the market, my adorable father didn't have much money—he never did have, somehow. So Anne's father, my Uncle Vincent, went into it with him to the extent of about three thousand dollars—"

"Three thousand!" Peter, who had been leaning forward, earnestly attentive, echoed in relief.

"That was all. Dad had about three hundred. Dad did all the work, and put in his three hundred, and Uncle Vincent put in three thousand—and the funny thing is," Alix broke off to say, musingly, "Uncle Vincent was perfectly splendid about it; I myself remember him saying, 'Don't worry, Lee. I'm speculating on my own responsibility, not yours.'"

"Well?" Peter prompted, as she hesitated.

"Well. They had a written agreement then, giving Uncle Vincent a third interest in the patent, should it be sold or put on the market—"

"Ha!" Peter ejaculated, struck.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

If you look "run down" you'll soon be run over.

GLAD TO GET RID OF IT

Mrs. Mary Bourke, 1097 N. Alliater St. San Francisco, Calif., writes: "I have been troubled with backache; took two Foley Kidney Pills and they helped me so good my back stopped paining me. I am so glad to get rid of it." Women find great relief in Foley's Kidney Pills. Hite's Drug Store.